



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE *108th* CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

Vol. 150

WASHINGTON, MONDAY, APRIL 19, 2004

No. 50

Senate

I come to the floor today to say a few words about what I believe is one of the most difficult issues to talk about in the ongoing conflict in Iraq. My remarks will not address whether I support our troops in Iraq, because I do. All Americans, I believe, are awed by the courage and sacrifice of our troops in Iraq. My remarks will not address whether I am concerned about the administration's failure to honor its commitment to our troops that they would be required to serve no more than 365 days "boots on the ground," because I am. My remarks will not address whether I believe it is essential that we win the fight to bring democracy, stay the course in Iraq until we see Iraq on the road to democracy, because I do. Instead, I rise for the sole purpose of acknowledging the terrible, growing toll this war is taking on some of America's finest citizens and their families.

More than 700 American troops have died in the war, and this month, as we all know, has been the deadliest month for U.S. soldiers in Iraq. More than 100 Americans soldiers have been killed in Iraq since April 1. Twelve more brave soldiers lost their lives in Iraq this past weekend.

I come to the floor to pay tribute to the sacrifice of these soldiers. They sacrificed everything because our Nation asked them to, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude. I say to the grieving families of our fallen heroes: America is with you in sorrow, and we will not forget you or the loved ones you have lost.

On Holy Thursday, April 8, on the western outskirts of Baghdad, on the road to Fallujah, Marine Lance Corporal Levi Angell died when the Humvee he was riding in was hit by a rocket propelled grenade. He was 20 years old. After learning of his son's death, Levi Angell's father stood outside the family's home in St. Louis, MN, clutching an 8-by-10-inch photo of his son close to his heart. "This was my son," he told reporters. "I am as proud as proud can be of that young man." He added, "It's a sad, sad day. This is a sad, sad country right now."

This is a sad, sad day in South Dakota, too. Last night, we learned that one of the 12 American soldiers killed in Iraq this past weekend was a member of the South Dakota National Guard. Army Specialist Dennis Morgan was the sixth South Dakota soldier to die in Iraq and the first member of the South Dakota National Guard killed in this war. A military spokesman said he was helping clear mines and explosives Saturday when a roadside

bomb went off. He was 22 years old, and married.

He joined the Guard immediately after graduating from high school in Winner, SD, class of 2000. He had been in the Middle East for just under 2 months. Today, South Dakotans are mourning Specialist Morgan's death, and praying that his family can find some comfort for their sorrow. We also pray for the safety of the soldiers who remain in Iraq.

I want to say a few words about some of the other fallen American heroes who lost their lives in Iraq this month.

Marine Private First Class Dustin Sekula, of Edinburg, TX, was killed by enemy fire in Fallujah on April 1. Private First Class Dustin Sekula graduated from high school last year and gave up a full college scholarship to join the Marines. The father of a high school friend told his hometown newspaper, "He was worth his weight in gold. He would try to conquer anything they would throw at him."

Twelve American soldiers died in Iraq on April 4, Palm Sunday. Eight of those soldiers died together in a battle with militia loyal to Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in Sadr City, a Shiite slum on the outskirts of Baghdad. The soldiers were part of a quick response team that rushed to rescue a platoon pinned down by gunfire in Sadr City.

Seven of the eight were members of the Army's 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. They had been in Iraq less than 3 weeks. They were: Specialist Casey Sheehan, 24, from Vacaville, CA; Specialist Dustin Hiller, 25, of Opelika, AL; Specialist Ahmed Cason, 24, of McCalla, AL; Corporal Forest Jostes, 22, of Albion, IL; Sergeant Yihjyn Chen, 31, from Saipan, Marianas Protectorate, who spoke five languages and became a U.S. citizen in the Army; and Private First Class Robert Arsiaga, and Specialist Israel Garza, two West Texans, both 25, both married, who became best friends at Fort Hood.

At a memorial service in Baghdad for the fallen seven, their Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Gary Volesky, said, "Uncommon valor was common that day."

The eighth soldier killed in the firefight in Sadr City, Sergeant Michael Mitchell, 25, of Porterville, CA, was with the Army's 1st Armored Division. He had been in Baghdad for 11 months and had re-enlisted 3 months before he died. His father joined hundreds of other people

marching in a peace rally in San Luis Obispo on the first anniversary of the war. Bill Mitchell told reporters, “I said, ‘Bring my son home now.’ I should have said, ‘Bring my son home alive.’ ”

Seven American soldiers died in Iraq on Monday, April 5, Passover. Among them was Army Sergeant Lee Todacheene, of Farmington, New Mexico, a member of the Army’s 1st Infantry medic unit. He was killed instantly when mortar fire hit his guard post in Balad.

Sergeant Todacheene was the nephew of Navajo Nation Vice President Frank Dayish Jr., through Dayish’s wife, Virginia. He is the third Native American soldier to die in Iraq. Army Specialist Lori Piestawa, a member of the Hopi tribe killed last March, was the first woman killed in combat in the war. Sheldon Hawk Eagle, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, died last November.

Leaders of the Navajo Nation praised Todacheene as a “Navajo warrior” who “went to war not to hurt, but to help.” His younger brother, Rydell, said, “He was proud to be in the U.S. Army and a medic. He was proud to be a Navajo. He believed he was doing some good in Iraq when everyone thought it was wrong. He was a quiet man. He was a strong man, a gentleman. He respected himself and everybody, He was generous and kind, and he loved his family above everything else.”

Tuesday, April 6, was one of the deadliest days of fighting in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Thirteen Americans died in Iraq that day. Among them were two 18-year-old Marines, both killed by hostile fire in Fallujah.

Marine Lance Corporal Anthony Roberts, of Bear, DE, was a member of the Air Force ROTC in high school. In an interview with the Philadelphia Inquirer, his former ROTC instructor recalled Lance Corporal Roberts as “the rare recruit who seemed not to care about the steady employment, decent pay and educational benefits that the military offers. ‘He only talked about serving his country.’ ”

Marine Private First Class Ryan Jerback was from Oneida, WI. He was killed by hostile fire in Fallujah. His father told the Green Bay Press Gazette that his son told him, “Dad, maybe I can go over there and make some change. Maybe I can do something with the people and show them that we’re not animals here, you know?”

“He gave everything he had,” his father said, “and it cost him his life.”

Six American soldiers died in Iraq on April 7. Among them was Army Staff Sergeant George Scott Rentschler, of Louisville, KY. He was checking on his platoon members, who were working at a checkpoint, when a rocket propelled grenade hit the side of a tank in which he was riding. Iraq was his second war. He had also served in Bosnia.

His mother told the Louisville Gleaner, “He always told me that the only way he would get hurt was if they took a rocket to the side of his tank. That’s what happened.”

Staff Sergeant Rentschler had been scheduled to leave Iraq today. He was 31 years old. He leaves a wife and two sons, ages 12 and 5.

Eight Americans died in Iraq on April 8, Holy Thursday. Marine Staff Sergeant William Harrell, 30, Placentia, CA, was one of them. He was killed by hostile fire in Fallujah.

His widow, Kelli, told the Associated Press that when she broke the news to her 7-year-old son, he asked her, “If (Daddy) just got shot, can’t they help him?” She replied, “Daddy can’t be helped right now. Daddy’s with God.”

Thirteen American soldiers died on April 9, Good Friday. Among them was Army National Guard Specialist Michelle Witmer, of New Berlin, WI, who died when her Humvee was ambushed in Baghdad.

Michelle’s 24-year-old sister, Rachel, served in the same unit, the 32nd Military Police Company. Her twin sister, Charity, was sent to Iraq last year as a medic. The sisters and the rest of the Witmer family is agonizing now about whether they should rejoin their units in Iraq. Michelle Witmer was one of at least two women, and four National Guard members, killed this month in Iraq.

Eight American soldiers died in Iraq on Easter Sunday, April 11. Army Sergeant Major Michael Stack and Marine Lance Corporal Torrey Gray were among them. Sergeant Major Stack, a Special Forces soldier, was 48, a father of six and grandfather of three. Lance Corporal Gray was 19; he was on his second tour in Iraq. They both died from hostile fire, in separate incidents, in Fallujah. As word of Lance Corporal Gray’s death spread through his hometown of Patoka, IL, a small town about 60 miles east of St. Louis, village officials put up the “Avenue of Flags,” an observance usually reserved for national holidays.

Army Specialist Richard Trevithick, of Gaines, MI, was one of two U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq on April 14. The 20-year-old combat engineer died when an improvised explosive device exploded near his Humvee in the city of Balad. The explosion caused massive damage to his chest and killed him instantly. He had been in Iraq 2 months.

His father told the Associated Press, “You hear it, you process it, you understand the words, but the impact doesn’t hit you. You wake up in the morning thinking it was a mad dream, then realize it was not.”

As I said, I support our troops and what they are trying to accomplish in Iraq—under the most difficult of circumstances.

The reality is that this war requires almost no sacrifice for the overwhelming number of Americans. Our lives are undisturbed. But the Americans I pay tribute to today sacrificed everything they had. They are heroes and an inspiration. May we never forget and may we always cherish their valor and their sacrifice.